
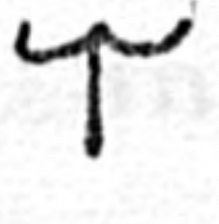

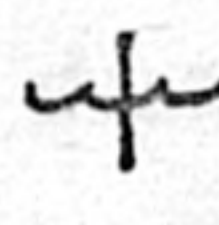


THE EARLY VAI SCRIPT AS FOUND IN THE BOOK OF NDOLE

Gail Stewart

The appearance of the early Vai script was familiar to the Liberian Vais who taught me the modern script in the 1950s, but they found it largely illegible and even rather humorous. No wonder they were baffled. The only known specimens of it were to be seen in S.W. Koelle's venerable grammar of the 'Vei language',<sup>1</sup> and in the 'Book of Rora', a small forty-four-page book printed in London in 1851 and distributed throughout the Vai country.<sup>2</sup> What amused the modern Vais was in reality a European interpretation of their script: that is, handwriting by Vais had been redrawn by Europeans so that it could appear in print. When the original manuscript of the 'Book of Rora' was turned up in 1967 in the Houghton Library of Harvard University, and, in the same year, the two-page Forbes manuscript, also in pre-1850 Vai, was 'discovered' in the British Museum, it became obvious that the foreign copyists, with all good intentions, had stylized and distorted the early Vai script to the point of absurdity, and sometimes beyond recognition.<sup>3</sup>

Now we know that the difference between the old script and the modern is not as great as was supposed. The old  ta, for instance, is only the modern  inverted, whereas the foreign rendition  might look more like  se to the modern Vai, whose flexible imagination allows for inversion, reversal, and quarter-turns of characters but not such a radical metamorphosis. Nevertheless, the script has changed in significant ways over the decades since Momolu Duwalu Bukele, a Vai, and his colleagues



devised it in about 1833. and many characters in the old script remain illegible today. then, starts afresh, with the recently-

Details of the script's invention, its discovery by Europeans, and its use, along with a provisional syllabary comparing the earliest known form of the script with that of the present day, can be found in David Dalby's 'A survey of the indigenous scripts of Liberia and Sierra Leone: Vai, Mende, Loma, Kpelle and Bassa' (1967).<sup>4</sup> At the time of Dalby's survey, however, the only early version of the script available was European-drawn, and the only identification of those characters had been made by the three men who published them: F.E. Forbes, S.W. Koelle, and Edwin Norris. Forbes was the British naval officer who first brought the script to widespread public attention after seeing a Vai inscription on a house in Cape Mount in 1848; he then spent three months drawing up a list of characters and a vocabulary with a local informant. As a result of Forbes' report, the Church Missionary Society sent Koelle, a brilliant but inexperienced linguist, to Liberia in 1849 to study the script and the language. The syllabaries collected by Forbes and Koelle were subsequently combined by Edwin Norris, with systematic reference to the original manuscripts and translations sent back to London by Koelle, one of which was the 'Book of Rora'. It is not surprising that the relatively short exposure of Forbes and Koelle to the Vai language and script should result in misidentification of characters due to mistranslation, and in errors of phonetic interpretation.<sup>5</sup> But the fact remained that, until a specimen of original early handwriting came to light, any comparison of the 1849 script with the modern script



had to be tentative.

The present paper, then, starts afresh, with the recently-found manuscript of the 'Book of Rora' itself, the longest early Vai text now extant. 'Rora', it should be noted, was Koelle's spelling of the 'book-name' adopted by the author of the manuscript, Kããle Bala. Hereafter in this paper 'Rora' will be honored with the correct phonetic spelling of his name: Ndole.

With the old Vai back in the old kpolo, or 'book', the original is restored in fact as well as in spirit, and we can move in on one segment of Dalby's comprehensive work for a closer and, it is hoped, more accurate view. Although the paper focuses, for convenience of illustration, on one page of the 'Book of Ndole', its observations are based on a study of the entire manuscript, which included the making of a phonetic transcription and a tentative translation, correcting as far as possible the transcription and literal translation into German published by H. Steinthal in 1867, thus far the only such analysis in print.<sup>6</sup> (Koelle himself supplied a free but less reliable translation into English when he sent the Ndole manuscript to London.)<sup>7</sup>

Working with the new phonetic transcription, I have reconstructed a syllabary directly from the Ndole manuscript. This is not the first time, of course, that the original 'Book of Ndole' has been drawn upon for the construction of a Vai script syllabary. Koelle's syllabary was composed from it and, presumably, from the other two manuscripts he had at his disposal.<sup>8</sup> Forbes drew his from his short manuscript and the extensive contributions of his informant.<sup>9</sup> Norris collated the work of both these men in conjunction with a study of Koelle's original



manuscripts, and added some characters which neither had supplied but which did appear in the manuscripts.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Norris' collated version of all the examples of the early script has been an indispensable guide for me; despite its errors, it has sometimes confirmed a guess based on textual evidence which nevertheless seemed to contradict logic.<sup>11</sup> And, although an American copyist runs the same risks as a European, the resulting syllabary is, I hope, the first close approximation to the African original.

Also available for cross-checking have been the only other specimens of old Vai script known to exist, both collected in 1849. One has been translated but is European-copied; part of a manuscript by Duwalu Bukela himself, it appears in Koelle's Vai grammar of 1854.<sup>12</sup> The other is the Forbes manuscript, which I used only indirectly to confirm a few identifications, since it has not yet been fully translated.

None of my research on the 'Book of Ndole' would have been possible, of course, without the patience, good will, and encouragement of the Vai scholars who worked with me: my teacher, the Rev. William Vaanii Gray; my colleague, the Rev. Christopher Kei Kandakai; and my mentor, Mr. S. Jangaba M. Johnson of the Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs, and Tourism in Monrovia, Liberia.

As a Fellow of the Radcliffe Institute, I have received warm and practical support in carrying out the research, for which I am most grateful. My thanks are also due the John Anson Kittredge Educational Fund for an encouraging additional grant.



### The Ndole Syllabary

The syllabary on the following two pages reproduces as accurately as possible the pre-1850 Vai script as it appeared in the 'Book of Ndole'. Since my aim is to present only a verifiable syllabary, characters listed by Koelle and Forbes which do not appear in the text of the 'Book of Ndole' are omitted, except for two.<sup>13</sup> These are the characters for pa and wã, and are taken from the Duwalu Bukele manuscript; they are the only characters in that manuscript which do not appear in the 'Book of Ndole'. On the assumption that the European redrawings do not differ too much from the originals, the two characters have been added to the syllabary because their phonetic identity is easily confirmed by translation. Further additions will have to await the translating of the Forbes manuscript.

The syllabary therefore lacks a number of characters which, though not found in the course of the Ndole manuscript, were undoubtedly in use at that time. They can best be seen in the Koelle and Forbes syllabaries as collated by Norris, and have been provisionally identified, with varying degrees of certainty, by Dalby in the survey previously mentioned. The reader should, of course, keep in mind this intentional omission when comparing the Ndole syllabary with the full modern syllabary following it on pages 8 and 9.

The modern syllabary is in any case larger, for in 1899 the Vai scholar Momolu Massaquoi, Prince of Gallinas and later Liberian Consul in Hamburg, standardized the script by publishing it in chart form, to which he and his colleagues added



## THE NDOLE SYLLABARY

	i	a	u	e	ɛ	ɔ	ɒ	nasal vowels
p		ᵐᵛ			ʒ		ᵐᵛ	
b	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ					
ɓ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	
mɓ		ᵐᵛ		ᵐᵛ			ᵐᵛ	
kp		Δ	ᵐᵛ	X	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ/ᵐᵛ kpā
gb	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ		ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ		ᵐᵛ	
f	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	
v		ᵐᵛ						
t	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	
d	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ					
l	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	
ɖ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ		ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	
nd		ᵐᵛ		ᵐᵛ		ᵐᵛ		
s	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	
z	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ					ᵐᵛ	
j	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ		
nj		ᵐᵛ			ᵐᵛ			
y		ᵐᵛ		ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ		ᵐᵛ	
k	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ kã
ŋg		ᵐᵛ						
g		ᵐᵛ				ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	
h				ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ			
w	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ wã
-	ᵐᵛ	ᵐᵛ						



## Nasal syllables

	ĩ	ã	ũ	ẽ	õ		syllabic nasal
ñ	ẽ						
m	((	ff	z	:	⊕ ⊖		
n	ff	I	⊕	×			
ny	fb	~p		⊕→	ℓℓ		
ŋ		e		∇	ξ		ξ

## LOGOGRAMS

lf	ḁaŋ	(finished)	h	kai	(man)
((((	ḁaŋ	(hear, understand)	~p	keŋ	(foot)
ll	ḁeŋ	(child, small)	⊕	nii <u>or</u> (cow) <u>or</u> kpe kɔwu	(case of gin)
~b	ḁoŋ	(enter)	Δ	kun	(head, be able)
~p:	ḁɔɔ	(be small)	⊖	lɔ	(in)
∇	faa	(die, kill)	I	taa	(go, carry, journey)
ξ	feŋ	(thing)	~h	tiŋ	(island)
ℓ	joŋ	(slave)	⊕	toŋ	(be named)

## NOTES

1. An additional character,  $\text{f}/\text{f}$  so(ŋ), occupies an ambiguous position in the syllabary.

$\text{f}/\text{f}$  is differentiated from  $\text{f}$  in that a final  $\text{ŋ}$  seems always to be either included or actually added, and yet the character has no fixed meaning which would indicate it as a logogram. (An exception to this phonetic identification appears to be the use of  $\text{f}$  in sowolu, 'five', but there seems to be an implied  $\text{ŋ}$  in sowolu which makes its appearance in the word for 'six', a combination of the root word 'five' with 'one': sonḁonḁo.)

2. Seldom-used variant characters, or variants used only in names, include the following:  $\text{f}$  fa,  $\text{f}$  ma,  $\text{f}$  sa,  $\text{f}$  wo.



## THE MODERN VAI SYLLABARY

	i	a	u	e	ɛ	ɔ	o
p							
b							
ɸ							
mɸ							
kp							
mgb							
gb							
f							
v							
t							
d							
l							
ɖ							
nd							
s							
z							
c							
j							
nj							
y							
k							
ŋ							
g							
h							
w							
-							




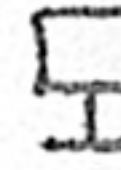

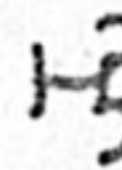






## Nasal syllables

	ĩ	ã	ũ	ẽ	õ	syllabic nasal	
ñ	ɔ̃		ə̃	omy			
m	ll	ʁ	ʃ	llll	ɔ̃		
n	ʁɛ	I	ɪ	ɔ̃	ʔɛ		
ny	ʃ	ʏ	ɪ	ʏ	22		
ŋ		e		K	ɔ̃		ɔ̃

## NOTES

This syllabary is a slightly modified version of the standard syllabary produced in 1962 at a seminar held by the University of Liberia's Program of African Studies in Monrovia. In a few cases I have added a second form of the character which seems to be in frequent enough use to warrant inclusion. I have omitted the standard syllabary's wh series as being too rare. In actual use, of course, formation of the characters varies widely. Some are often inverted, reversed, or turned on their sides, and some (as for instance in the alternates provided) may vary in phonetic value.



characters with diacritics to distinguish between varieties of related consonants (unvoiced/voiced, oral/nasal) which had not previously been distinguished.<sup>14</sup> (The original script seems to have had only a few cases in which related consonants were indicated by related forms; in the Ndole manuscript they are all of the unvoiced/voiced type:  / , kpo/gbo;  / , fa/va;  / , sa/za;  / , ka/ga; and perhaps  / , kpe/gbe.) They also introduced characters to represent sounds not found in the Vai language, for the more accurate writing of foreign and borrowed words. Of these, only the ch series is now in common use. Interestingly enough, it is the only non-Vai series which seems to have had some precedent in the early script.


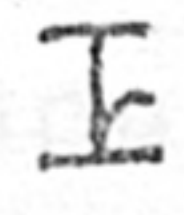

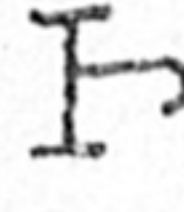


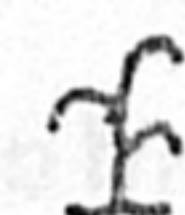

Massaquoi, in turn, brought the Vai script to the attention of Professor August Klingenberg of the University of Hamburg in the 1920s, and Professor Klingenberg became the foremost foreign authority on the Vai script. With Zuke Kandakai, he hoped to expand the syllabary to include new characters for syllables with nasal vowels, but this innovation never became popular. When a seminar on the Vai script met in Monrovia in 1962 under the sponsorship of the University of Liberia's Program of African Studies, the late Professor Klingenberg (who died in 1967) was the only foreigner among the fifteen Vai scholars on the Standardization Committee. The syllabary drawn up by that committee is the most recent standardization.<sup>15</sup>

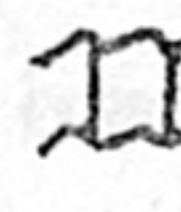
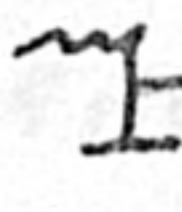
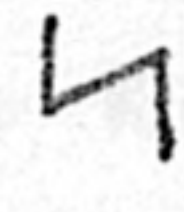
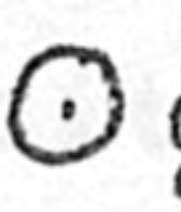


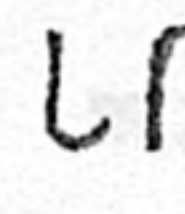

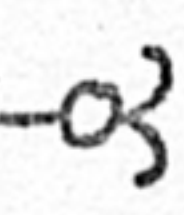

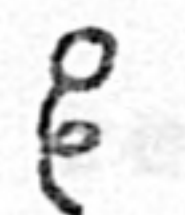
The Ndole syllabary, on pages 6 and 7, is arranged according to the format used by Dalby, with the exception of three lines. Although there is evidence that characters for the foreign syllables ci and possibly ca existed in 1849, the c(ch) line has been

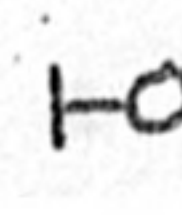






 'head',  'go', and  'die', although, as he points out, it is difficult to avoid subjective judgements in this sort of investigation.<sup>16</sup> One also has to be sure what the essential form of the character is. Dalby bases his evaluation of 'go' on the similarity of the European-copied  to Bamum and Djuka characters for 'go', although the connection seems less likely when  is compared with the original . And a possible explanation for the logogram 'die'--a withered plant--relies on its appearance in the Forbes manuscript and in modern use, , but in the Ndole syllabary (as well as the Duwalu manuscript) the reader will see that the plant looks healthy enough: . However, whether the logograms are pictographic or not, their repeated use in the early script is of considerable importance.

Occasionally in the 'Book of Ndole' the words represented by two of these characters are 'spelled out':   for ,   for . Furthermore, a few of the logograms have been used, infrequently, in a purely phonetic way, apparently without regard for the meaning:  in Bandakolo and banda, 'sky';  in a name, Tealogbei;  in jolowo, 'chains'. But otherwise the use of the logograms is remarkably consistent--each one always representing the same word--and even the exceptions just noted may have some semantic explanation not immediately obvious. Certainly the inventors of the Vai script showed their awareness of the etymology of longer words by incorporating logograms where they were appropriate:  in kundokili, 'intelligence', for instance, and  in the town name Jondu, to which tradition still attaches the original meaning 'slave abode'.<sup>17</sup>

One logogram frequently found in longer words is ,



translated approximately as 'in'. It is used postpositionally either alone or in combination with other words: e.g. jalɔ, 'in front (in the face)', kpalo, 'behind (in the track)'. But this postpositional use is always distinct from the purely phonetic lɔ represented by ⚡.

A final note on the logograms used by Ndole points up, once again, the endlessly fascinating possibility of pictographic origin. Koelle read the character ⚡ as 'bullock', but modern Vai scholars have another interpretation. S. Jangaba M. Johnson explains: 'The character drawn in the form of a case, with three dots inserted therein, could signify nothing else in Ndole's manuscript but a case of gin. The three dots represent the bottles.' There is nothing in the context, where it appears three times, to contradict either interpretation. Indeed, confirmation of kpe (as used here, 'gin') might be found in Koelle's citing of ⚡ as an 'obsolete form' of be. Could be have been mistaken for kpe? It is just possible, and the missionary-linguist might have been misinformed in the translation of Ndole's story.

### Ndole's Story of the Vai Script

For a true picture of the old Vai script, one should see it, of course, not in chart form but as it was written. On the following page is reproduced, by courtesy of the Harvard College Library, a tracing of a single page of the Ndole manuscript. On pages 15 and 16 each line has been reproduced with a parallel



## NDOLE'S STORY OF THE VAI SCRIPT

1 8 1 8 □ 7 : 9 6 ■ 7 →  
2 7 8 8 11 = 9 9 9 7 7 7 7  
3 → 9 8 7 8 9 8 7 7 7 7  
4 □ 7 7 9 9 8 9 7 7 7 7  
5 7 11 = 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7  
6 7 : 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7  
7 : 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7  
8 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7  
9 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7  
10 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7  
11 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7  
12 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7  
13 11 = 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7  
14 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7  
15 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7  
16 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7  
17 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7  
18 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7 7  
19 11 =











modern version underneath.<sup>18</sup> At the end of the paper will be found a line-by-line phonetic transcription and literal translation, along with a free translation.

The page has been selected because of its special interest: it tells, apparently, of the invention of the Vai script by Duwalu Bukele (here given his adopted 'book-name', Duwalu Kpolo or 'Duwalu Book') and his five friends, among whom was Ndole himself. Ndole speaks in the third person, frequently using the phrase 'Ndole says', 'he says', or, elsewhere in the manuscript, 'the book says'.<sup>19</sup> It is almost impossible to introduce this account without speculating, briefly, on several points: its brevity, its deviation from Duwalu Bukele's own account (in which, as he told Koelle, he was given some of the characters in a dream and then asked the help of his friends in making up the rest),<sup>20</sup> and the function of the mysterious Joni, with whom the six young men were learning English.

An entirely different reading of the story, however, has been advanced by S. Jangaba M. Johnson. In a recent communication he has said that he believes Ndole is telling of an event which took place long after Duwalu's invention of the script. According to Vai tradition, once the script had won the approval of King Gotolo, a school was established at Bandakolo, Duwalu's birthplace and a 'half-town' of Jondu, for the teaching of the script; some years later Bandakolo was destroyed by war. Ndole Wonu, a native of Jondu, has come down in Vai history as the man responsible for reviving the teaching of the script after the destruction of the school.<sup>21</sup> Johnson is of the opinion that this account by Ndole describes the revival, not the invention,



of the script. Koelle, however, received the manuscript from Ndole before the devastation of Bandakolo, which, according to both Koelle and the Vais' own historical account, occurred after Koelle's visit. On the other hand, Koelle describes a school being built at Jundu, and the burning of Jundu (well before his visit) as 'a crisis in the history of Vei writing'.<sup>22</sup> Ndole's work might have followed that crisis. Certainly the question should be studied further.

The page containing Ndole's story was evidently the last page of the manuscript sent back by Koelle, for it appears at the end of the printed 'Book of Rora', and also at the end of the translations by Koelle and Steinthal. However, the page was bound into the front of the little dark-green leather-bound volume which finally reached the Houghton Library at Harvard. It follows the title page of the original manuscript, on which is written in English 'Manuscript, once belonging to Kálí Bára in Bándakóró', and it precedes the beginning of Ndole's autobiography.

Although this part of the manuscript is typical of the rest in that the conventions of orthography and the handwriting are the same, it has its own distinction. The manuscript proper appears to have been written with the rather thick strokes of the traditional bamboo pen, whereas this page contains more text, composed of smaller characters which might well have been written with the finer point of a 'civilized' pen. Is it possible that Ndole wrote his story of the script for Koelle when he gave him the manuscript? An unexpected note on the reverse side of the page conjures up a scene which would not be out of place today



in a Liberian village: Ndole writing the requested account in front of the house he lent Koelle in Bandakolo, perhaps using the makeshift desk Koelle devised with his two trunks, and surrounded by friends, who are reading aloud and making suggestions. The note, which could have been addressed to one of these friends, reads 'Taa kpe saŋ mu ni a mi. Tawa jamba feŋ mu he!' and in effect asks him to 'Go buy some wine for us to drink. Tobacco leaf would be good too.' The scene, of course, is conjectural, and is neither confirmed nor denied by the written message. But if the page was indeed written especially for Koelle, we may have an explanation for both the elliptical nature of the story and the failure to mention Duwalu's dream--perhaps it was haste, or perhaps reticence. Or perhaps, with its introductory sentence 'You already know how this script became ours, through God,' the account was meant as a clarification for Koelle of the events surrounding the actual work on the script, which followed, perhaps by days or weeks, Duwalu's inspirational dream. Or it could have been, as Johnson suggests, Ndole's own story of the later revival of the script.

Aside from the impetus provided by Duwalu, other factors which may have stimulated the invention of the script--including the question of non-African influence--are still a matter of scholarly conjecture.<sup>23</sup> Dalby in his 1967 survey assumes that Ndole's account is of the script's invention and notes the presence of 'a European named "John" [i.e. Joni]' at the conference in Jundu. P.E.H. Hair and Svend Holsoe have been investigating independently the possibility that the Vai syllabary might have been suggested by, though not derived from, the



Cherokee syllabary which had been invented in the United States at least a decade earlier. Holsoe has established a surprising link: a half-Cherokee immigrant from the United States, Austin Curtis, who may or may not have known the Cherokee script, came to Cape Mount as a commissioner from Monrovia in the 1820s.<sup>24</sup>

It might be added that this link is further strengthened by the fact that the famous Vai characters seen by Forbes on the house in Cape Mount actually read 'This is Curtis' house.'<sup>25</sup> But

'Joni' is not 'Austin', nor do we know in fact whether Joni was a European. His agreement with Nfa Duwalu Wollogbe as to the superiority of Europeans sounds genuinely African, and he is not designated as a polo mo (European) as is a certain Jemi (James) later in the 'Book of Ndole'. Liberians, then as now, often adopted English names; Forbes' informant, who was also one of Koelle's, had the English name of John Sandfish, for instance, and also spoke English.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the reader of this page is presented with a presumably factual account by one of the participants, and yet the circumstances are by no means clear. What does remain clear in the narrative, however, is that the script was deliberately devised--or revived--as the result of a challenge, a challenge put forward by an African to his countrymen to equal the Europeans in kundokili.

But, to return from the message to the medium, let us investigate how much the early script differs from the modern, and in what ways. The additions by Massaquoi to the modern syllabary can easily be seen in the parallel versions on pages 15 and 16. Distinctions not formerly made between oral and nasal



syllables account for such changes as  $\delta$  to  $\mathbb{E}$ ,  $\mathfrak{h}$  to  $\mathfrak{p}$ ,  $\xi$  to  $\mathfrak{w}$ ,  $\mathfrak{z}$  to  $\mathfrak{y}$ . This does not take into account, however, the basic core of characters which constituted the early script and were carried over into the modern, or changed, or dropped. Of the seventy-five characters used on our sample page of old script, twenty-five would in all probability be unreadable today. The reasons for such illegibility vary:

1. The early character is entirely different from the modern. Note  $\mathfrak{L}$  and  $\mathbb{B}$ ,  $\mathfrak{z}$  and  $\mathfrak{f}$ ,  $\mathfrak{H}$  and  $\mathfrak{U}$ . This category accounts for only a small part of the total syllabary.

2. The form has changed enough to obscure a basic similarity between the two characters. Testing a very small number of competent Vai readers (seven), I found that in general they misread or could not even guess at the following characters:  $\mathfrak{H}$ ,  $\mathfrak{H}$ ,  $\mathfrak{E}$ ,  $\mathfrak{Y}$ ,  $\xi$ ,  $\mathfrak{H}$ ,  $\mathfrak{H}$ ,  $\mathfrak{P}$ ,  $\mathfrak{X}$ ,  $\mathfrak{P}$ ; two or three of the group were also puzzled by  $\mathfrak{H}$ ,  $\mathfrak{G}$ ,  $\mathfrak{I}$ ,  $\mathfrak{Y}$ ,  $\mathfrak{I}$ ,  $\mathfrak{H}$ . Just what constitutes the essence of a given Vai character is a provocative question, and one deserving further study. For to the foreign eye, though  $\mathfrak{X}$  might be difficult to identify with  $\mathfrak{X}$ ,  $\mathfrak{P}$  seems to be a close variation on  $\mathfrak{H}$ . The clue probably lies in the wide fluctuation observable in modern script writing, and the degree to which each character may be allowed to deviate from the standard form and still be read. One finds, for instance, that  $\mathfrak{P}$  tends toward such extremes as  $\mathfrak{P}$ , which certainly looks more like  $\mathfrak{P}$  than  $\mathfrak{H}$ . This class of illegible characters is a large one, and the most variable, since the experience of the readers themselves is variable.

3. There is no modern phonetic equivalent. The example on



page 14, 20 kā, is one of very few such characters. Two others are ŵē wā and ⊕ kpā, which are still used today by some writers, probably because they were preserved and taught by Massaquoi. None of the three was included in the standard syllabary composed in 1962.

4. The phonetic value has changed. Perhaps the most interesting shift in the whole 'Book of Ndole' is that from the early Ⅱ ka to the modern Ⅱ ga, while the modern ka is derived from the logogram 4. The change in value from ka to ga represents the only one of the unvoiced-to-voiced type, the others being in the often interchangeable oral/nasal groups ɓ/mɓ, ɗ/ɗɗ, ɲ/ɲɲ. A shift not marked by interchangeability is ɔ ɔ to ɔ ɔ, but ɔ belongs also in the next category.

5. The character represents a word, which today would be written phonetically with a different character or characters.

On this page of the Ndole manuscript there are four such logograms: ɔ ɔ, ɔ ku, ɔ ɔ, ɔ ɔ. In modern script they would be written phonetically: ɔ, ɔ, ɔ, and ɔ.

The sixteen logograms used by Ndole in the book as a whole have been already discussed in the section on the syllabary. The character for faa, it was mentioned, is the lone survivor in today's script, but it is used mostly by the older people--a use no doubt reinforced by Massaquoi's recognition of it in his syllabary. Three of the logograms have evolved into single-syllable equivalents or variations--ɔ into ɔ, ka into ka, and ɔ into ɔ--but most of the sixteen seem to have had no carry-over into modern script.

Thus, aside from the phonetic refinements added by Massaquoi



to the original script, it appears that up to a third of the old script has changed significantly, an estimate supported by my investigation of the manuscript as a whole as well as by the sample page presented here. Much of the change has occurred in the form of basically similar characters. A smaller proportion of characters have been replaced, or have shifted in value. A few syllabic characters have become obsolete or nearly so. But the greatest loss has been the set of logograms by which the Vai script of Ndole's day was distinguished.



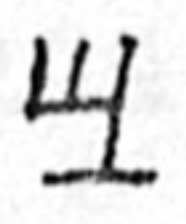


## FOOTNOTES

1. S.W. Koelle, Outlines of a Grammar of the Vei Language, together with a Vei-English Vocabulary, and an Account of the Discovery and Nature of the Vei Mode of Syllabic Writing (London: Church Missionary House, 1854).
2. [E. Norris, ed.], ['The Book of Rora'] (London, 1851).
3. Svend Holsoe of the University of Delaware located the original 'Book of Rora', which is catalogued at the Houghton Library as MS 2235.59.18\* and bears the title 'Manuscript original en langue Veï' on the spine. The Forbes document, found by P.E.H. Hair of the University of Liverpool and David Dalby of the University of London, is listed by the British Museum as Add. MS 17817, 'Original sheet of a manuscript of the Vahie Phonetic'.
4. David Dalby, 'A survey of the indigenous scripts of Liberia and Sierra Leone: Vai, Mende, Loma, Kpelle and Bassa', African Language Studies, VIII, 1967, 1-18, 40-43, 51.
5. Forbes used the roman alphabet alone to approximate what he heard. Koelle, although his phonetic system employed diacritics, had difficulty in distinguishing between certain vowels, such as o and u, and between such closely related consonants as b/ɓ/kp/gb and d/ɗ.
6. H. Steinthal, Die Mande-Neger-Sprachen (Berlin, 1867), 280-312.
7. S.W. Koelle, Narrative of an Expedition into the Vy Country of West Africa, and the Discovery of a System of Syllabic



Writing, Recently Invented by the Natives of the Vy Tribe  
(London, 1849), Appendix, 6-14.

8. Ibid. An 'Alphabet of the Vei written language' follows p. 34. The Appendix contains 'Translations made by Mr Koelle of the three Vy books which he has sent home'. A later version of the syllabary, along with a European copy of part of one of the manuscripts (Duwalu Bukɛɛ's) and a transcription and translation, appears in Koelle, Outlines of a Grammar of the Vei Language.
9. See note 3 above. The manuscript is accompanied by letters from Forbes and Forbes' list of 'Characters of the African Language'.
10. F.E. Forbes, 'Despatch communicating the discovery of a native written character at Bohmar...accompanied by a vocabulary of the Vahie or Vey tongue', and E. Norris, 'Notes on the Vei language and alphabet', both in Journal of the Geographical Society of London, XX, 1851, 89-113. Norris' syllabary appears opposite p. 90.
11. E.g. the distinction between  so and  son, when so in modern script uses a derivative of the latter: .
12. Koelle, Outlines of a Grammar of the Vei Language, 241-52.
13. It should also be noted that on the pages numbered (in pencil) 39 and 40 of the 'Book of Ndɔɛ' the text is interrupted by a random listing of seventy-two characters, most of which are followed by the word me, 'this is'. Some are the same as characters appearing in the text, but the majority are not; being out of context, they cannot be identified.



14. Momolu Massaquoi, 'The Vei language', Spirit of Missions (New York), LXIV, 1899, 578. A later version appeared in Journal of the African Society, IX, 1911, 459.
15. The Standard Vai Script (University of Liberia, African Studies Program), August 17, 1962.
16. David Dalby, 'The indigenous scripts of West Africa and Surinam: their inspiration and design', African Language Studies, IX, 1968, 183-9.
17. [S. Jangaba M. Johnson], Traditional History, Customary Laws, Mores, Folkways and Legends of the Vai Tribe (Monrovia: Department of the Interior, 1954), 73.
18. The modern version is the result of strict character-for-character substitution, except where the present-day characters combine two sounds (as in ṽṽ<sup>2</sup> nda, which blends ṽ and la) or where a logogram is written out phonetically. No attempt has been made to modernize the spelling or the syntax, which would in many instances differ.
19. This convention has been omitted in the free translation.
20. Koelle, Outlines of a Grammar of the Vei Language, 235-8.
21. Johnson, Traditional History, 49-54, and communication with the author of this paper.
22. Koelle, Outlines of a Grammar of the Vei Language, 237-8.
23. On this subject, see the entire article by Dalby in note 16 above, as well as references in note 4.
24. Svend Holsoe, 'A case of stimulus diffusion? Note on possible connections between the Vai and Cherokee scripts'



Language Sciences, no. 15, April 1971, 22-24.

25. See note 10 above. The inscription, which reads phonetically 'kɔisi a wa ke(ŋ) mu', appears opposite p. 111.
26. Koelle, Outlines of a Grammar of the Vei Language, ii.







fo amu anu dawola amu ando ke wo 14  
say and they said yes so they said then you

ma we amu sama kpeya amu kaidenge- 15  
do now and morning dawned and young men

nu dasonda Mba Gaambo ja bono ko- 16  
gathered Mba Gaambo's own storeroom under

lo nu mu anu la kpolo me sɔduma anu 17  
there it was they script this originated they

we a nyɛɪ la we anu we nyɔnu sun- 18  
it wrote they each other sent

da 19

You already know how this script became ours, through God. There will always, of course, be some argument about the subject of writing.

Ndole himself, Jala Zawo, Jala Kããle, Zolu Tabako, Faã Gbese, and Duwalu Kpolo--these six--were with Joni in Jondu, learning English. And Nfa Duwalu Wologbe and Joni began to talk about the idea of writing.

'How intelligent the Europeans are!' they said. 'There is no one like them.' But the young men who were present said, 'That's a lie.'

And Nfa Duwalu replied, 'Can you write a letter and send it, and can your friend look at it and tell what it says?'

They said that they could. So Nfa Duwalu and Joni replied, 'Then you do it.'

Morning dawned and the young men gathered in Mba Gaambo's kitchen. There they originated this script. And from then on they wrote letters and sent them to each other.

(Note: 'Nfa' and 'Mba' are terms of respect for older men and women.)